Hillsborough Township Public Schools

Assessment Systems Review

Hillsborough uses a suite of student assessments based primarily on those required by the state of New Jersey and federal “No Child Left Behind” requirements. At the core of these assessments are the NJASK tests which are administered in core content areas in grades 3-8. Supplementing this base is the HSPA assessment for 11th graders, college entrance exams like AP and SAT, “End of Course” assessments in Biology and Algebra, English Language Proficiency assessments, and alternative assessments for students with significant disabilities. Occasionally and when selected, the district also participates in NAEP testing.

Analysis of assessment data is primarily conducted at the Central Administration level. The analysis method is “attainment” based, looking at the number and percentage of students attaining proficient or higher levels in a given year. Often, this attainment approach is coupled with a “cohort” analysis where one group of students is compared to the same grade of students from a previous year or the scores of the same cohort from the previous grade.

Because the district uses national college entrance exams, it is able to compare participation rates and aggregate scores to state and national averages as a sort of capstone comparison. Further, when the district is selected to participate in NAEP testing (which it frequently is) even greater state and national comparison data is available.

The purpose of this review is not to restate or make judgments on the academic achievement results from Hillsborough. Rather, it is to evaluate the assessment system and make recommendations for how it could be improved and made more useful in both an instructional and an evaluative sense.

Suggested changes for Hillsborough’s assessment system are detailed below:

1. **Adopt a longitudinal data analysis method.** Simple attainment based methods (such as looking at the percentage of students who are proficient and advanced) have some uses in that they are easily understandable and can help the district identify the most glaring problem areas. However, in order to more fully understand if students are reaching their expected potential and to more effectively control for demographic, socio-economic, disability, and second language acquisition effects (which have tremendous influence on attainment based analysis methods) a longitudinal method must be employed. Further, to more effectively identify the most effective staff members and make the most of the district’s human capital, longitudinal methods can be extremely informative in determining who should be teaching what and also what areas professional development or other remediations are necessary. The most effective longitudinal analysis method currently available (in my opinion) is the value-added approach. There are several companies and individuals conducting value-added analysis the district might choose from, not the least of which is Dr. William Sanders with SAS/EVAAS who invented the method in Tennessee decades ago. Put simply, moving to a value-added look at student assessment data will be the single most powerful change the district could make in terms of student assessment.
2. **Adopt predictive “benchmark” assessments in grades 3-11.** Monthly benchmark tests can be used to give the district a quick snapshot of its current progress toward meeting state standards. For the classroom teacher, these assessments can be used to identify those students not making progress and where they need help. This system can also be of tremendous help in determining the level of interventions provided through a “Response to Intervention,” or RTI, approach to instructional delivery.
3. **Fill in the 9 – 10 “hole.”** Students currently take the last NJASK in the 8th grade and then take their next large scale standardized test in the form of college entrance exams in the 11th grade. Some assessments should be added in these years to allow for further value-added analysis into high school and to be predictive of successful achievement on the 11th grade college entrance exams. Several assessments could be used here such as the Terra Nova, which the district has previous experience with. A suggestion might be the NWEA-MAP test as it is a computer adaptive assessment and is able to provide a valid score with minimal disruption to instructional time.
4. **Initiate use of a “data warehouse” where all assessment data is available to the instructional staff.** Teachers need unfettered access to all the assessment data available on their students. Several online options now exist for housing this data in secure, encrypted, and password protected environments that allow teachers and principals tremendous ability to design, customize, and drill down into the reports that are meaningful to them in making instructional decisions.

For assessment data to be used appropriately in a performance-based compensation system, it must feature a longitudinal approach to data analysis. This method takes into account bias, error, and student characteristic effects that can easily cloud an attainment based approach. Further, the predictive benchmark assessments should be added for intervention purposes and the assessment system must be configured to allow for “vertical” alignment from grade to grade without interruption. Finally, the data should be provided to staff in a transparent and easy to use and understand model.